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ABSTRACT

A confusing variety of terms is used in discussions of age grouping practices. This digest examines terms that have important implications for teaching and the curriculum. The terms "nongraded" and "ungraded" typically refer to grouping children in classes without grade-level designations and with more than a 1-year age span. The term "combined classes" refers to the inclusion of more than one grade level in a classroom. The term "continuous progress" generally implies that children remain with their classroom peers in an age cohort regardless of whether they have met prespecified grade-level achievement expectations. The terms "mixed-age" and "multi-age grouping" refer to grouping children so that the age span of the class is greater than 1 year, as in the nongraded or ungraded approach. These terms are used to emphasize the goal of using teaching practices that maximize the benefits of cooperation among children of various ages. The distinctions between the grouping practices have significant implications for practice. The ungraded approach acknowledges that age is a crude indicator of children's readiness to learn. Mixed-age grouping takes advantage of children's heterogeneous experiences. Research indicates that, in spite of its risks, the potential advantages of mixed-age grouping outweigh its disadvantages. (BC)

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ERIC Digest

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Nongraded and Mixed-Age Grouping in Early Childhood Programs

Lilian G. Katz, Ph. D.

Interest in the potential benefits of mixed-age grouping in preschools and the early primary grades has increased steadily in recent years (Willis, 1991). Two large-scale mandates to "ungrade" the first years of schooling are receiving a great deal of attention from educators. One is the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1989 and the other is the provincial mandate of British Columbia in Canada for ungraded classes in the primary years. These initiatives are likely to be followed in several states where similar efforts are under consideration (e.g., Oregon).

Among the reasons behind the trend toward mixed-age grouping are widespread concern about the high proportion of young children who are retained in the early grades, increasing recognition that grade repetition does not help children overcome difficulties in meeting narrow and specific grade achievement expectations, attempts to implement developmentally appropriate teaching and curriculum practices in the early grades, and growing awareness of the potential benefits of cross-age interaction to intellectual and social development (Katz et al., 1990).

Confusion of Terms

A confusing variety of terms is used in discussions of theoretical and practical issues surrounding age grouping practices. Sometimes the terms *ungraded, nongraded, continuous progress, mixed-* or *multi-age grouping* are used interchangeably (Willis, 1991). The terms *split* and *blended classes* are also used. The mixed-age grouping widely practiced in Britain during the so-called Plowden years was often called *family grouping* or *vertical grouping*. The purpose of this digest is to examine the terms and distinctive connotations of the terms that may have important implications for teaching and the curriculum. Broad definitions are suggested under the following four headings:

Nongraded or Ungraded Grouping

The terms *nongraded* and *ungraded* typically refer to grouping children in classes without grade-level designations and with more than a one-year age span. When these terms were introduced by Goodlad and Anderson (1959), the primary rationale was to increase the heterogeneity of class composition and thereby liberate teachers and children from rigid achievement expectations linked to a pupil's age. However, Goodlad and Anderson found that implementation of nongraded or ungraded classes in the late 1950s and thereafter tended to result in grouping children homogeneously for instruction on the basis of ability and achievement level, regardless of their ages. Studies of these programs reveal two significant misunderstandings: "The first is the failure to understand that nongrading is a scheme for organizing schools vertically. The second is the false assumption that a scheme of school reorganization automatically changes other educational practices" (Goodlad and Anderson, 1963; Goodlad and Anderson, 1987; Shinn, 1967).

In many implementations of nongradedness, children in a class or across classes are placed in regular or temporary groups for specific instruction in basic skills regardless of their age. In this approach to nongradedness, the main goal is to increase the homogeneity of ability of instructional groups rather than the interaction across ability groups. In other words, the terms *nongraded* and *ungraded* refer to grouping practices in which ages are mixed, but the primary purpose is to homogenize groups of children for instruction on bases other than age.

Combined Grades

Combined classes include more than one grade level in a classroom. Such groupings are sometimes referred to as *split* or *blended* or *double year* classes. Combined classes usually include the required curriculum for each of the two grades represented, although some class activities may be conducted with children of both grades combined. This kind of grouping occurs frequently in small schools, and occasionally in larger ones when the number of children in different age cohorts fluctuates. The main goal of these kinds of classes appears to be to maximize personnel and space resources rather than to capitalize on the diversity of ability and experience in the groups with mixed ages.

Continuous Progress

This term has a variety of meanings, but generally implies that children remain with their classroom peers in an age cohort regardless of whether they have met or surpassed prespecified grade-level achievement expectations. The *continuous progress* term is usually associated with a strong emphasis on individualizing the curriculum so that teaching and learning tasks are responsive to the previous experiences and rates of progress of each child regardless of age. This practice is sometimes called *social promotion*. The main rationale for the practice is that separation from one's age cohort may stigmatize a child. Like the nongraded and ungraded approaches, programs focused on continuous progress are not primarily aimed at maximizing the educational benefits of children of different ages and abilities learning together. Rather, the goal is to let children progress according to their individual rates of learning and development without being compelled to meet age-related achievement expectations.

Mixed-Age or Multi-Age Grouping

This term refers to grouping children so that the age span of the class is greater than one year, as in the nongraded or ungraded approach. The terms *mixed-age* and *multi-age grouping* are used to emphasize the goal of using teaching and curriculum practices

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that maximize the benefits of interaction and cooperation among children of various ages. In mixed- or multi-age classes, teachers encourage children with different experiences and stages of development to turn to each other for help with all aspects of classroom activity, including the mastery and application of basic literacy and numeracy skills. However, in mixed-age classes, teachers use small temporary subgroupings of children who need the same kinds of instruction to help them acquire basic skills.

Implications of Each Grouping

Although the distinctions between the grouping practices implied by the terms defined above may seem slight, they have significant implications for practice. The ungraded or nongraded approach acknowledges that age is a crude indicator of what children are ready to learn. It emphasizes regrouping children for instruction on the basis of perceived readiness to acquire knowledge and skills, and not according to age. It does not emphasize educational benefits of a learning environment in which children at different knowledge and skill levels work together. In other words, the main goal implied by the term *nongraded* is that of homogenizing children for instruction according to achievement instead of age, even though this was not the original rationale for introducing the term (Lewis, 1969).

Several kinds of combined grades and continuous progress practices do not set out to increase the sense of family within the class or encourage children with different levels of knowledge and experience to learn together. In contrast, *mixed-age grouping* involves class composition that takes advantage of the heterogeneity of experience, knowledge, and skills in a group of children with an age range of more than one year (Katz et al., 1990). Research on cross-age interaction in spontaneous, experimental, and educational settings indicates that a variety of developmental and educational benefits can be obtained from such interaction, especially in the early years (Balaban, 1991). Elkind (1989) recommends mixed-age grouping as a developmentally appropriate alternative to a rigid lock-step curriculum and as a way to strengthen teachers' sensitivity to the normal variability of children's developmental trajectories in a single age group.

Mixed-age grouping can provide older children with the opportunity to be helpful, patient, and tolerant of younger peers' competencies, and thus give them some of the desirable early experiences of being nurturant that underlie parenting and helping others who are different from oneself. Exposure to older children as nurturers provides young recipients with models of behavior they can emulate when they become the older members of a group. Research on cross-age interaction, peer tutoring, and cooperative learning indicates that an age range of greater than one year can provide a level of intellectual stimulation that supports the development of both intellectual and academic competence. This sort of learning environment is also likely to generate greater social benefits than same-age groups, especially for children who are at-risk in particular social development categories (Katz et al., 1990).

Implications for Practice

Grouping children in classes with a wide age range cannot by itself yield the benefits implied by the research on cross-age interaction and multi-age grouping. If these benefits are to be realized, the curriculum must be modified to provide a variety of activities in which children work together on projects and other activities, preferably in small multi-age groups in which each individual can contribute in different ways to the total effort (Katz and Chard, 1989; Blumenfeld et al., 1991).

Teaching strategies likely to result in children's realizing the benefits of a wide age range include encouraging more knowledgeable and experienced children to assist less able ones, regardless of age, as needed; encouraging younger children to request assistance from more competent classmates; and encouraging older and more experienced children to take responsibility for helping the others.

Each grouping arrangement has its risks. A risk of homogeneous age grouping is that some children will become acutely aware of failing to live up to normative expectations for behavior and achievement for their age. Risks of mixed-age grouping are those of younger children becoming burdens to older ones and being overwhelmed by more competent classmates. Teachers must keep in mind the risk of overlooking older and more experienced children's need for challenge, but this is the case in every class, even when student age is not a factor. Research on mixed-age grouping suggests that in spite of its risks, its potential advantages outweigh its disadvantages (Katz et al., 1990).

For More Information

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